

1 | Introduction: the leitmotif problem

Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases.
J.R.R. Tolkien¹

With the statement above, the author of *The Lord of the Rings* defended the originality of his work against Richard Wagner’s earlier *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. While we might argue with Tolkien about the amount of resemblance – both his Ring tale and Wagner’s were epic structures heavily based on Norse mythologies – we can accept Tolkien’s contention that he was not directly influenced by Wagner. The same distance from Wagner cannot be asserted, however, of Peter Jackson and Howard Shore’s cinematic *The Lord of the Rings* adaptation. In fact, it’s hard to imagine any Western musico-dramatic genre of the last 130 years – be it film, musical theater, programme symphony, or opera – that hasn’t felt the long shadow of Richard Wagner in one way or another. And on no other topic does this shadow fall with such seductive suggestiveness and such maddening obscurity than on the leitmotif.

The opening of a book that purports to explain how to understand the leitmotif is a natural point at which to define it. This is, however, a task easier said than done. For that reason I begin not with a definition, but rather with a pair of examples, musical excerpts from Wagner’s *Ring* and Shore’s *The Lord of the Rings* that most listeners, I imagine, would agree are leitmotifs of one kind or another. If we can grasp the commonalities of form and function between these musico-dramatic constructs separated by genre, cultural context, and over a century in time, we can better frame the challenges that face us in defining, and in ultimately understanding, the leitmotif.

Example 1 presents two themes from Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Both are associated with Fafner, the first in his incarnation as a giant (i.e., “Giants”), the second after his transformation into the dragon

¹ See Tolkien’s letter of February 23, 1961 to his publisher, Allen & Unwin, on remarks made by Åke Ohlmarks, the Swedish translator of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1981: 306). 1

(a)

(Fasolt und Fafner, beide in riesiger Gestalt, mit starken Pflöfen bewaffnet, treten auf.)

nun!
Sehr wichtig und zurückhaltend im Zeitmass.

ff

Dotted rhythms

Anacrusis "smear"

P4

(b)

Träg und schleppend

pp

pp

Anacrusis "smear"

+4

sempre pp

poco marcato

pp

"Dragon" Fragments

The image shows two musical excerpts. Excerpt (a) is from 'Giants' (Rg/68/1/1ff) and features a piano introduction with a dotted rhythm and an anacrusis 'smear'. Excerpt (b) is from 'Fafner as Dragon' (Sg/185/4/3ff) and features a piano introduction with a 'Dragon' fragment and an anacrusis 'smear'.

Example 1.1 Comparison of “Giants” and “Fafner as Dragon” in Wagner’s *Ring*

- a. “Giants,” Rg/68/1/1ff.
b. “Fafner as Dragon,” Sg/185/4/3ff.

(i.e., “Fafner as Dragon”).² It is not necessary to know the story of Wagner’s *Ring* to recognize the musical effectiveness of these themes and their relationship to one another. In “Giants” (Example 1.1a), the dotted rhythms and

² A note on methodology: All leitmotifs appear within quotation marks (e.g., “Spear”) to distinguish them from the objects, characters, events, and moods represented by the same word. I name each theme from Wagner’s *Ring* using Darcy’s nomenclature (see Warren Darcy’s (2001) unpublished guides to the themes of *The Ring* provided in the appendix to Bribitzer-Stull 2001). All references to Wagner’s opera scores are as follows: music drama/page/system/measure and refer to the Schirmer Vocal Score (e.g., Sg/184/3/1 = *Siegfried*, page 184, third system, first measure). The abbreviations for the music dramas are as follows: Rg = *Das Rheingold*, Wk = *Die Walküre*, Sg = *Siegfried*, and Gd = *Götterdämmerung*.

scoring for brass and timpani strongly suggest a march topic; the low register, minor mode, and *Sehr wichtig und zurückhaltend im Zeitmass* tempo further suggest a funeral march.³ Clearly, this music reinforces the emotions surrounding the corresponding scene: the ominous and plodding approach of Fafner and his brother, Fasolt. The dramatic efficacy of “Giants” is thus predicated upon a blending of denotative and connotative associations; the affect of the specific scene on stage and the more generalized, culturally established funeral march topic reinforce one another.

Much later in *The Ring* drama Fafner transforms from a giant to a dragon. In Example 1.1b we see a theme associated with his latter incarnation, “Fafner as Dragon.”⁴ The musical relationship between this theme and “Giants” parallels the dramatic relationship between Fafner’s two identities. The F minor tonality, register, dotted rhythms, falling fourth, and anacrusis smear are common to both statements, appropriate musical markers for the brutish nature Fafner retains in both guises. But the temporal changes – a slower, *Träg und schleppend* tempo, and interpolated rests – of the second theme lend it a ponderous quality compared to “Giants,” and the fragments of the “Dragon” theme from *Das Rheingold* are an obvious reference to Fafner’s new form.⁵ The heart of this transformation, however, is the intervallic corruption from perfect fourth to augmented fourth (labeled “+4” on the example). This descending tritone is a local marker for Fafner’s physical and moral corruption, distinguishing between the two themes; but Wagner also grants it global importance, for it later becomes both the sonic representation of Fafner’s voice and the tonal structure of an entire scene.⁶

Of crucial importance in these examples is that the musical development from “Giants” to “Fafner as Dragon” parallels the dramatic developments of Fafner’s character. In Wagner’s mature dramas, such developments

³ Musical topics, or *topoi*, have been operative in Western art music for centuries. Only recently, though, have scholars approached them formally, first describing and cataloging them (Ratner 1980), then analyzing the role they play in tonal structures and musical meaning (Agawu 1991; Hatten 1994). *Topoi* naturally bear an intimate relationship to the leitmotif, a topic taken up more thoroughly in Chapter 5.

⁴ Since this transformation happens offstage sometime between the first and third dramas, and this theme’s initial presentation is during the *Vorspiel* to *Siegfried* Act II (Sg/136/1/2ff.), first-time listeners might not yet understand its dramatic significance. Later in the act, during Siegfried’s confrontation with the dragon, this significance becomes clear (Sg/185/4/3ff.).

⁵ The “Dragon” theme first appeared during Alberich’s transformation in Scene 3 of *Das Rheingold* (Rg/150/3/1ff.).

⁶ Most of Fafner’s lines in *Siegfried* are sung to tritones. See, for example, Sg/154–56 and 185–88. Moreover, *Siegfried* Act II, Scene 1 features a bi-polar tonal arrangement that fluctuates between B minor and F minor.

(a)

Grave

(b)

Maestoso

Example 1.2 presents another theme from an epic musico-dramatic work about a ring of power. The “Ring” theme from Howard Shore’s score to *The Lord of the Rings* films, shown in Example 1.2a, sounds at the opening of the first movie when Galadriel narrates the Ring’s tortured history. On screen, audiences see *The Lord of the Rings* title frame followed by scenes depicting the forging of the great Rings of Power. Galadriel’s narration implies that these rings exploited the baser drives of men and dwarves, leading to their eventual corruption. The narration, camera angles, and dark Tim Burton-esque cinematography all help construct the ancient, tenebrous history that undergirds the epic tale about to unfold.

Example 1.2 Thematic mutation of “Ring” theme in Jackson/Shore *The Lord of the Rings*

- a. “Ring” during Galadriel’s opening narration
- b. “Ring” as Frodo enters the Cracks of Doom

become omnipresent, layering one upon the other. This environment allows for the possibility of *accumulative association* in which music, like language, becomes capable of modifiers – elements that qualify the meaning of an associative theme. With each re-statement of a theme there exists the possibility that added perspective will color the emotional associations we have with it, much like the experience of revisiting childhood haunts as an adult. This evolving associative capacity is what so inspired composers’ continued use of leitmotif technique after Wagner.

Example 1.2 presents another theme from an epic musico-dramatic work about a ring of power. The “Ring” theme from Howard Shore’s score to *The Lord of the Rings* films, shown in Example 1.2a, sounds at the opening of the first movie when Galadriel narrates the Ring’s tortured history. On screen, audiences see *The Lord of the Rings* title frame followed by scenes depicting the forging of the great Rings of Power. Galadriel’s narration implies that these rings exploited the baser drives of men and dwarves, leading to their eventual corruption. The narration, camera angles, and dark Tim Burton-esque cinematography all help construct the ancient, tenebrous history that undergirds the epic tale about to unfold.

Like Wagner’s “Giants,” Shore’s “Ring” theme relies in part upon time-honored cultural tropes for its affect. The most prevalent of these is the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09839-8 - Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music

Matthew Bribitzer-Stull

Excerpt

[More information](#)

descending half-step, a musical figure bearing a long association with grief and anguish. Echoes of this figure can be heard in the $\hat{6}-\hat{5}$, C–B in the bar 1 melody, the harmonic succession of F to E minor triads in bar 1, and the feeling of half-step transposition from bars 1–2 to bars 3–4. Simultaneous half-step dissonances between moving lines, and the underlying harmony (e.g., the beat 1 melody note in bars 1–2 and the beat 4 horn note in bars 1 and 3) increase the poignancy of the affect. Other figures contribute an air of static uncertainty to the “Ring” theme: The repeated rhythmic figure, melodic turn figure (ultimately going nowhere), and recurring harmonic successions contribute to the feeling of inertia, while the half-bar alternation of moving vs. long notes, the lack of clear tonic, the registral and textural disjunction between melody and harmony, and the closing motion from G minor to E \flat minor all lend the theme an aura of arcane ambiguity.⁷

That *The Lord of the Rings* begins with the “Ring” theme is only fitting – the essential plot thread of the trilogy follows the forces of good as they strive desperately to destroy the Ring, an accomplishment that will bring down the Dark Lord, Sauron, whose forces teeter on the brink of overwhelming Middle Earth. Audiences hear the “Ring” theme a number of times throughout the trilogy, but among these many iterations, one near the climax of the final film stands out: it is a brief fragment sounded just as Frodo enters the Cracks of Doom – a volcano that lies within the Dark Lord’s realm and the only place in which Sauron’s Ring of Power can be unmade (see Example 1.2b).

There can be no question that this is a variant of the “Ring” theme; the melodic turn figure (an exact transposition of the first eight notes of “Ring”) over static harmony resembles no other musical materials in Shore’s score. But it is hardly the same thing we heard at the opening of the first film. The obvious changes are the major-mode implications of this setting and its

⁷ While the music cited in Example 2a is tonal in the broadest sense and is triadically based, it is difficult to posit a tonic key for the excerpt. The beat 3 arrival of the melody on the B–E fifth supported by E minor harmony is the most tonally confirming gesture. Rather than being construed through a sense of prolongation or harmonic function, though, this is a tonality that is merely asserted, one of the weaker senses of tonic as described by Daniel Harrison in his analysis of *Ein Heldenleben* (see Harrison 2002: 143–45).

Bars 3 and 4 have a feeling of being transposed a half-step lower, to E \flat minor, even though these measures are not an exact transposition of bars 1–2. In fact, an E \flat minor triad is reached only after the G minor $\frac{6}{4}$ that concludes the excerpt shown in Example 2a. (This juxtaposition of two minor triads whose roots lie a major third apart bears a special Wagnerian tonal and associational significance and comprises the subject of Chapter 6.)

Buhler 2006 describes the “Ring” theme as lugubrious owing to the attraction of the melodic embellishments about $\hat{5}$ and to the weight of its burden conjured up by the slow tempo, initial pause, emphasis on $\hat{6}$ and quick melodic descent to tonic.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09839-8 - Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music

Matthew Bribitzer-Stull

Excerpt

[More information](#)

extreme brevity. In short, the original “Ring” theme has been truncated and redeemed from minor into major. The falling half-step root progressions and melodic tendencies of the original are gone, replaced with a stable harmonic backdrop and a half-step dissonance (G \sharp to A or \sharp 4 to $\hat{5}$ in D major) whose tendency is to *rise* rather than fall.⁸ Thus, the connotations are now of wonder and optimism – connotations abetted by the registral unity, heroic brass orchestration, and added human timbral element of non-texted chorus. Comparing this to the emotional evocation of the original “Ring” statement, we find that Shore, like Wagner, alters the musical materials of his themes to fit (and to help create) new dramatic environments.

If, as the brief analyses above suggest, leitmotivic emotional associations contribute in large part to the sense of drama in multi-media works like opera and film, then leitmotifs’ relevance to the audience can hardly be denied.⁹ This relevance is equally palpable from the composer’s point of view; composers’ remarks indicate that leitmotifs form a crucial component of the compositional process itself.¹⁰ In addition to confirming the importance of the leitmotif, though, these two thematic comparisons also raise crucial questions. 1) “What part of thematic meaning derives from specific dramatic context and what part from generic, pre-existing cultural tropes?” The analyses above blended these, but their intersection remains unexplained. 2) “How do we determine theme names, thematic identity, and thematic relationships?” This is a natural question for those who noticed the name change in the first example pair (“Giants” became “Fafner as Dragon”) and the name retention (“Ring”) in the second. And, 3) “Why are these musical excerpts granted leitmotivic status when hundreds of bars of music from both Wagner’s *Ring* and Shore’s film score don’t achieve such distinction?” In short we can boil down these inquiries to this: “What is a leitmotif, and how does it function?”

⁸ The transposition to D major and the prevalence of \sharp 4 are aspects of this thematic statement that have long-range connections to music throughout the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. See the end of Chapter 9 for a full discussion.

Note also the difference in effect between the tritone in this thematic presentation vs. that in “Fafner as Dragon.” In the “Ring” variant the tritone is part of an [0137] tetrachord whose imbricated [016] trichord is often used cinematographically to evoke wonder (see Murphy 2006), while in “Fafner as Dragon” the tritone is a destabilizing force, a corruption of the F–C perfect fourth at the heart of the earlier “Giants” theme.

⁹ See Ross 2003 for an argument concerning the continued relevancy of leitmotifs to today’s audiences. His article also makes some comparisons between Wagner’s *Ring* and Shore’s film score that mirror claims in this book.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Danny Elfman’s comments during his interviews in Columbia Pictures, Inc. 2002 and 2004 in which he stipulates that developing themes is the most difficult portion of constructing a film score and the point at which he often begins to work in earnest.

What is a leitmotif?

We begin by considering the name of the entity we hope to understand – “leitmotif.” When translated into English, it is often rendered as “leading motive.” But the weak semantic sense of this phrase has conditioned English speakers to prefer the original German. “Leitmotif,” however, has strong Wagnerian connotations that are not always appropriate to works both before and after Wagner. Moreover, “leitmotif” implies that the “motive” is the typical form these musical statements take. This is problematic in English-speaking communities where “motive” indicates an incomplete musical thought, a small piece of a larger musical whole. In actuality, the idea of the *theme*, a more-or-less complete musical thought and its concomitant developmental connotations, is more akin to what we are trying to describe. Despite these problems, “leitmotif” remains a valuable term when used with precision. Developmental associative themes that comprise an integral part of the surrounding musical context both in Wagner’s works and in later musics should qualify. Generic musical-associative constructs, though (previously known as leitmotifs, reminiscence themes, *idées fixes*, and the like), are better known collectively as “associative themes.” The distinction is found even within Wagner’s works, both early and mature, which include various forms of associative musical statements, from static blocks that intrude upon the musical texture – reminiscence themes, that is – to plastic themes and motives highly integrated into a transformative network that parallels the vagaries of the drama. Thus, much of the subsequent material in this book is directed toward understanding what distinguishes the leitmotif from other associative themes.

Defining the leitmotif is not a novel pursuit. From 1860 to the present day, commentators have made the attempt; their solutions range from the elegant-but-oversimplified:

‘Leitmotif’ may be defined as a recurrent musical idea which has been invested by its composer with semantic content.¹¹

to painful attempts at completeness that rival Wagner’s prose for their prolixity:

[Leitmotifs] consist of figures, or short passages of melody of marked character which illustrate, or as it were label, certain personages, situations, or abstract ideas

¹¹ Darcy 1993: 45.

which occur prominently in the course of a story or drama of which the music is the counterpart; and when these situations recur, or the personages come forward in the course of the action, or even when the personage or idea is implied or referred to, the figure which constitutes the leit-motif is heard.¹²

A leitmotif is a short, uncomplicated musical phrase or theme, usually one to three measures, which is employed, and reused, by the composer when he deems it important to the composition. In the case of Wagner and his *Ring*, the leitmotif became a musical theme representative of a figure, an event, an emotion, a thought, an idea, or a concept in the drama, which theme he repeated, often in subtle but distinct, varying, and often tempered pitch, tone, and/or intensity according to the interpretive demands of his dramatic argument.¹³

Scholars like Thomas Grey get at important components of leitmotif – memory and recontextualization:

Leitmotif, then, is not just a musical labeling of people and things (or the verbal labeling of motives); it is also a matter of musical memory, of recalling things dimly remembered and seeing what sense we can make of them in a new context.¹⁴

It is, however, difficult to do justice to their rich complexity within only a few sentences.

Nor are Wagner’s own writings a panacea. Numerous and at times inconsistent, they are both prescriptive (especially those written during his long period of retheorizing musical drama in the late 1840s) and reflective (like the essays and open letters written post-factum to enhance understanding and to steer reception history of his completed works). Moreover, all of them tell us something about what a leitmotif *does*, but little about what it *is*.¹⁵ The excerpt below, from “Opera and Drama” (1850–51) is typical:

A musical motive (*Motiv*) can produce a definite impression on the Feeling, inciting it to a function akin to Thought, only when the emotion uttered in that motive has been definitely conditioned by a definite object, and proclaimed by a definite individual before our very eyes. The omission of these conditionments sets a musical motive before the Feeling in a most indefinite light; and an indefinite thing may return in the same garment as often as one pleases, yet it will remain a mere recurrence of the Indefinite, and we shall neither be in a position to justify it by any felt necessity of its appearance, nor, therefore, to associate it with anything else.—But a musical motive into which the thought-filled Wordverse of a dramatic performer has poured itself—so to say, before our eyes—is a thing conditioned by

¹² Parry 1889. ¹³ Cord 1995: 133. ¹⁴ Grey 2008: 114.

¹⁵ Kirby 2004, 11–16 summarizes Wagner’s theories of the leitmotif. Therein Kirby also comes to define the prototypic leitmotif and how it is different from other types of themes, motives, and associative entities.

Necessity: with its return a *definite* emotion is discernibly conveyed to us, and conveyed to *us* through the physical agency of the Orchestra, albeit now unspoken by the performer; for the latter *now* feels driven to give voice to a fresh emotion, derived in turn from that earlier one. Wherefore the concurrent sounding of such a motive unites for us the conditioning, the non-present emotion with the emotion conditioned thereby and coming at this instant into voice; and inasmuch as we thus make our Feeling a living witness to the organic growth of one definite emotion from out another, we give to it the faculty of thinking; nay, we here give it a faculty of higher rank than Thinking, to wit, the instinctive *knowledge* of a thought made real in Emotion.¹⁶

We sample much of Wagner's prose in the chapters ahead. For the time being, we might note that what sets his apart from most other leitmotif commentaries is the centrality of *emotion*, a topic to which we shall return at some length in Chapter 4.

Just as Wagner was not the only one to describe leitmotivic practice, neither was he the only one to compose recurring themes associated with the drama. And the appropriation of this technique in the works of other composers reveals the same disparity of understanding that the commentaries do. This, in short, is the leitmotif problem – because leitmotif admits to multiple practices and multiple interpretations throughout its reception history, it remains misunderstood.

Despite decades of explanatory vagueness and complexity, and scores of competing kinds of thematic recall in dramatic music of the last two hundred years, audiences remain enamored of the technique. Surely this is at least in part because we delight in repetition (more on this in Chapter 2) and easily recognize repeated themes when we hear them, realizing that they contribute to both a work's form and its sense of meaning.¹⁷ Moreover, we recognize not only thematic *recall*, but also thematic *instantiation*.¹⁸ How is this possible? As McClatchie put it:

How does a listener, hearing a work for the first time in the theatre, know that a particular musical gesture is significant and will recur? And how is conceptual

¹⁶ Wagner 1966b: 329–30.

¹⁷ If we agree with Wagner, they are one and the same: “dramatic Form is the conglomeration of plastic moments of feeling . . . content is present in expression and expression presents the content” (see Wagner 1966b: 347–49).

¹⁸ Dahlhaus notes this importance. Among his requirements for a functioning leitmotif is an extra-musical sense of recognizable identity to the audience (see Dahlhaus 1979: 107). Another of his requirements – that the music exhibit incompleteness stemming from harmonic and/or metric irregularity – is not, I think, mandatory. We will address this point at greater length in Chapter 2.

content then attached to these figures? With the exception of Lorenz, this matter is rarely discussed anywhere in the vast literature surrounding Wagner and his works.¹⁹

Answering these questions comprises the main thrust of this book. In so doing, I intend not only to *define* “leitmotif” in relation to the broader practice of generic thematic recall, but also to *resuscitate* its conceptual value, using an approach informed by past authors. I begin by culling from the leitmotivic definitions above three central components that circumscribe the concept:²⁰

1. Leitmotifs are bifurcated in nature, comprising both a musical physiognomy and an emotional association.
2. Leitmotifs are developmental in nature, evolving to reflect and create new musico-dramatic contexts.²¹
3. Leitmotifs contribute to and function within a larger musical structure.

Note that throughout the last 300-odd years composers have used a variety of musical statements for dramatic purposes, usually musical themes associated with the drama in some way or other. These include not only leitmotifs, but also reminiscence motives, *idéés fixes*, motto themes, *tintae*, cyclic processes, musical symbolism, musical characterization, and recall of overture music. Such devices can all rightly be called “associative themes” (i.e., themes associated with the drama). Among them, though, only the leitmotif exhibits the music-structural and developmental characteristics listed above.²² That is, the leitmotif is a special kind of associative theme.²³

¹⁹ McClatchie 1998: 109.

²⁰ Despite my grouching about incorrect and incomplete definitions of leitmotif by earlier authors, I must admit that there are plenty of examples of those who get it right, and not only by Wagnerian music scholars like Warren Darcy, Thomas Grey, and Barry Millington. I was heartened to see Meadows (2008: 105–29, an Elgar dissertation) calling out the emotional and transformative nature of the Wagnerian leitmotif as central to its identity. *Ibid.*, 112 even notes specific types of developments and relationships, though without going as far as categorizing them along the lines of Chapter 7 in this book.

²¹ Warrack (2001: 391–96) distinguishes the leitmotif from the earlier reminiscence motive (found in operas of Spohr, Méhul, and Weber) by its symphonic nature, specifically Wagner’s turning to the sonata-form development sections of the German symphonic heritage (Beethoven, in particular) for inspiration in generating the webs of motives and their concomitant developments he used for dramatic purposes.

²² I am far from alone in using such a rubric to separate leitmotif from other similar entities. See the distinction made in Kirby (2004: 5–11) between leitmotifs and reminiscence themes.

²³ Readers familiar with my earlier work will notice that this is a reversal from my established practice. Over the years I have studied this topic, I have come to believe that the term “leitmotif” does have value, particularly in distinguishing a form of developmental and music-structural associative theme first found in Wagner’s works and used in a variety of later genres.